

What is incredibly impressive about Senator BYRD is that he is not only the longest serving Senator in the history of this country, he is the most knowledgeable Senator with respect to the history of our body. He is the author—he literally wrote the book on the U.S. Congress and the Senate, among so many others that he has written. This reflects his incredible talent and intellect but also his incredible hard work and tenacity, and it reflects the range of experience he has had.

No one knows this body better than ROBERT BYRD. No one has served it longer. Nobody has served it with the same kind of energy, insight, and dedication. It has been reflected in West Virginia, across the Nation, and across the globe. For example, in 1947, shortly before Senator BYRD first came to Washington D.C. as a U.S. Congressman, there were only four miles of divided four-lane highway, in West Virginia. Today, as a result of Senator BYRD's work, the expansive Appalachian Development Highway System is nearing completion. He understood, as we must today, that economic development is not only a fundamental need, but that it results largely from the infrastructure improvements that speed commerce and literally connect people to one another.

Senator BYRD also is a tireless advocate for miners, those men and women—principally men—who go down and literally risk their lives in the coal mines. He knows this firsthand. As a result, mining-related injuries in West Virginia have significantly declined since Senator BYRD came here—the results of his actions, the results of his understanding, and the results of his commitment to the people he served. He worked hard each and every day for those who risk their lives in a dangerous occupation and deserve the attention and respect of this body and our country.

He has done much more than help the people of West Virginia. As I indicated before, as the greatest scholar in our body, he has demonstrated a profound understanding and respect for the Constitution of the United States. He has shown that not just in words but in deeds. He has been prepared to stand up when he thought constitutional values were being impaired. Indeed, no commitment is greater to Senator BYRD than his commitment to the Constitution and the values therein. He has stood up forcefully and persuasively on so many occasions to defend the Constitution and to serve truly the oath we all take to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution.

On Friday, Senator BYRD will celebrate his 92nd birthday. He will celebrate that in his usual fashion: He will work, I am sure. He will work for the people of West Virginia, for the people of this country, and for the people of the world. He will reflect back on his dearest partner, his wife, who was his support, comfort, and inspiration. He will reflect upon his children, grand-

children, and great-grandchildren. He will reflect upon a life well lived in service to his country. But more important, he will look ahead to the work he will do as he finishes this term and prepares for his next election to represent the people of West Virginia.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I would like to acknowledge the service of Senator BYRD, the senior Member of the Senate who, today, will become the longest serving Member of the U.S. Congress ever in our Nation's history.

When I first came to this body as a young aide to Senator Howard Baker 42 years ago, Senator BYRD had already been here as a Senator for 10 years. He had been in the Congress 6 more years than that.

I remember when he, Senator Baker, was elected majority leader and Senator BYRD was the Democratic leader, Baker went to BYRD and said: BOB, I have a proposal for you. I will never learn the rules as well as you know them, so I won't surprise you if you won't surprise me.

Senator BYRD said to Senator Baker: Howard, let me think about it.

So he thought about it overnight, came back, and that was their deal the next day, and that is the way they worked for 4 years in managing this Senate. Senator BYRD and Senator Baker both read David McCullough's book. Senator BYRD told me it changed their minds about the Panama Canal in 1980 in a decisive decision that was controversial in the Senate. I worked with him and the late Senator Kennedy, whom the Presiding Officer succeeded, on American history, and we have legislation pending which I hope we will pass when we reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act consolidating all the Federal Government's activities to encourage our children to learn U.S. history so they will know what it means to be an American.

Senator BYRD now more than ever is a part of that history. He is an indispensable Member of this body. He teaches us as well as serves with us and we honor him for his service.

I yield the floor.

HEALTH CARE REFORM

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I rise today to once again join my colleagues in addressing the need for comprehensive health care reform. The Senator from New Hampshire, Mrs. SHAHEEN, earlier spoke on health care reform and its effect on small business. I know my colleague, Senator UDALL from Colorado, is going to be speaking soon. And I know we are going to be joined, as well, a little bit later by Senator LANDRIEU, who takes a leadership role on the issues affecting small businesses, as chair of the Small Business Committee. I rise today to stress how important health care reform is to the small business community. Currently, there are small businesses across America that have been hit very hard

by the effects of the recession. Small businesses are struggling as they try to keep their doors open, with the enormous constriction of credit that is taking place. Small businesses are struggling to have the finances to expand; even healthy small businesses, as we have seen. Banks continue to draw back in capital and try to build up their own balance sheets. The people who have taken the hardest hit by the restriction on capital and the restriction on lending have been small businesses across this country.

So we have the enormous challenges small businesses have felt by the recession that has been exacerbated by the constriction of lending, and then we add on top of that the enormous challenges that small businesses face in the health care market. The only people who pay retail—who pay full price for their health care benefits in America today—are small businesses and those who purchase health care on the individual-based market. There is no group that will more benefit, or have more to gain from meaningful health care reform, than small businesses.

Small businesses currently lack the bargaining power of large firms and pay as much as 18 percent more for the same health insurance as larger companies. If you work in a large company you get the benefit of the larger pool, and you are better able to bargain for your health insurance rates. If you are poor and cannot afford health insurance, you get access to Medicaid. If you are a senior, you get access to Medicare. Small businesses are the group that falls through the cracks. They don't have access to this purchasing power, and consequently pay, on average, about 18 percent more for health insurance than larger companies.

As health insurance costs continue to rise, more and more small businesses can no longer even afford to offer health insurance to their employees. And if they do, their employees can't afford the co-payments to purchase health insurance. In fact, nearly one-quarter of the uninsured in our country works for small businesses. Between 2000 and 2009, the percentage of firms with less than 10 employees—the heart of small businesses—offering insurance coverage fell from 57 percent to 46 percent. Among people with employer-based coverage in January of 2006, one-sixth lost their coverage by 2008. Nearly three-quarters of small businesses that do not offer coverage to their employees cite high premiums as the reason. Small businesses want to offer health benefits to their employees, but are priced out of the market and cannot afford it.

Many small business employees are left uninsured and, in turn, rely on the health care system to pick up the costs when they get sick. It is these people who show up at emergency rooms and access the most inefficient part of our health care system. They are often-times not people who are unemployed, but employees of small businesses. Enacting market reforms such as creating

insurance exchanges will finally give small businesses affordable options. Their employees will have a place to purchase insurance at large pool rates and, by insuring more people, reform will help drive down the cost of health insurance for all Americans. Insurance exchanges will also significantly reduce administrative costs for small businesses by enabling them to easily and simply compare the prices, benefits, and performance of health care plans.

I know a number of us are working on a series of amendments for when the health care bill gets to the Senate floor to try to make sure we add further disclosure requirements and more transparency to our health care system. Right now we don't have a free market in our health care system because nobody knows what the providers actually pay, and what the doctors and hospitals actually charge. Small businesses will benefit by trying to bring transparency to these health insurance exchanges.

Additionally, reform will enact consumer protections such as prohibiting insurance companies from denying coverage based on preexisting conditions and dropping people when they are sick. This is particularly a challenge to small businesses. If you only have a small group of employees and a few have preexisting conditions, those preexisting conditions drive up the cost of providing insurance for this smaller pool. Oftentimes this results in pricing small businesses out of the market. Reforms such as eliminating preexisting conditions will dramatically help small businesses and their employees obtain affordable health insurance.

These protections are vital for small business employees because they help level the playing field in the small group market. They guarantee the option of large pool rates, lower costs, and prohibit insurance companies from arbitrarily penalizing small businesses when one of their employees becomes seriously ill.

Lowering health care costs for employers is also key to our ability to compete in the global economy. If American business is going to come out of this recession and we can compete with countries around the world, we have to take on the cost of health insurance. American workers are more productive than any other workers in the world. But even with that increased productivity, if American businesses have to pay \$3,000 to \$4,000 more per employee because of higher health insurance costs than our competitors that puts American businesses at a dramatic disadvantage.

As health care costs continue to rise, other business investments are sacrificed. Forty percent of businesses say health care costs have a negative impact on other parts of their business. As I mentioned, with the great reduction of credit availability to small businesses and in this challenging economic climate, American businesses

cannot afford to be at such a disadvantage. With health care reform, more of our Nation's dollars will go toward investments in our economy.

Health care costs also stifle productivity. Too many Americans end up staying in jobs simply because the employer provides health insurance. They aren't able to move around, or move into entrepreneurial startup firms where innovation and real growth potential takes place. Startup firms and, again, small businesses are often not able to offer health insurance. Consequently, we have good workers who are not able to move into these firms and help spur job growth because they are caught in dead-end jobs. They are constrained by the security of health insurance offered at their old jobs or perhaps because they have a preexisting condition and can't move to a new situation.

Again, if we do health insurance reform right, it will put in place reforms such as the elimination of preexisting conditions requirements that will allow more freedom of movement within the job workforce.

So, once again, I join my colleagues in making this case. We have made it time and again. Health care reform is necessary to make sure American businesses remain competitive. Health care reform is necessary because health care costs are the single largest driver of our Federal deficit. Health care reform is necessary because if we don't address rising costs, Medicare will be insolvent by 2017. If we don't reform the system, costs will also rise for families; an average Virginia family, for example, within the next decade, will be paying nearly 40 percent of their disposable income to meet their health insurance premiums.

I will close my comments with where I started. Small businesses are the only players in our market who still pay retail for their health care costs and are increasingly being priced out of the market. Reform is imperative for the small business community.

I know my friend, the Senator from Colorado, is about to speak, and our leader on small business issues, the Senator from Louisiana, who has been so diligent on leading these efforts and making sure that small businesses are protected in health care. We must get this right. We must get this bill to the floor. And we must provide needed relief to the small businesses that will generate the economic recovery that we're all hoping for.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Colorado is recognized.

Mr. UDALL of Colorado. Good morning. I, too, before I speak on health care, wish to join my colleagues in congratulating Senator BYRD. I, too, am in awe of all of his accomplishments, and I, too, admire his affection for the Senate and will endeavor in my service here to model his example.

I join my colleagues this morning to discuss an issue of great importance to Colorado and to me. These past few weeks, as the Presiding Officer has, along with many of us on this side of the aisle, I have spoken about comprehensive health insurance reform as a key to strengthening and securing the lives of middle-class Americans. One of the most important components of that goal is ensuring that we do everything we can to help small business owners and their employees get affordable health coverage.

As the Senator from Virginia mentioned, over the last 15 years, small businesses have created over 65 percent of the new jobs in our country. Yet the power of this job creation machine is being threatened by the exploding costs of health care. It will only get worse if we don't act.

If we do not pass health insurance reform, small business owners will continue to see the costs of providing benefits eat away at their bottom line. In my home State of Colorado, premium costs for small businesses are projected to more than double over the next decade. These unsustainable cost increases not only harm current businesses, but they prevent the growth of new ones. More and more would-be entrepreneurs across the country are deciding not to start their own companies due to the fear that they would not have access to affordable insurance for their families or for their employees.

Unfortunately, this fear is too often justified. In the insurance market today, small businesses lack the bargaining power to get affordable rates that many large employers enjoy. They find themselves subject to unpredictable and massive spikes in premiums. That is why it is so important that we pass a health care reform bill that takes proactive steps to address the rising costs of health care. I have to tell my colleagues I have been encouraged by the proposals I have seen thus far.

For example, a recent analysis of the nonpartisan CBO, the Congressional Budget Office, score of the Senate Finance Committee bill estimates that the reforms therein would save small businesses \$65 billion every year for the next decade. The proposal would do this, in part, by taking steps to transform our health care delivery system to one that produces higher quality care at lower costs. It would also include tax credits specifically designed to help cash-strapped small businesses provide coverage to their employees.

Additionally, new reinsurance programs would reimburse employers struggling with particularly high catastrophic costs. In addition to these probusiness proposals, we also need to make sure the market offers new and affordable options for those employers who want to offer coverage but currently cannot afford to do so. The new health insurance exchanges envisioned under the reform packages before us would permit small employers to purchase policies that spread risk across a

much larger population. New consumer protections would also keep costs down by prohibiting insurers from charging higher premiums on the basis of health status or gender.

Right now, being a woman is a pre-existing condition under the terms of many insurance policies. That is just not acceptable. Employers would also be able to keep expenses down by promoting personal responsibility—offering wellness premium discounts to employees who make healthy choices.

Enacting meaningful health care reform is necessary for ensuring productive small businesses, new American jobs, and a strong economy. Independent and unbiased analyses estimate that in the next 10 years, reform can save upward of 80,000 small business jobs and raise wages by more than \$30 billion annually. Those are very promising numbers.

As the Senate begins its historic floor debate on health insurance reform, you can expect that I and my colleagues will continue reminding the other side of the aisle just how critical reform is to the small business community. No amount of misleading rhetoric or misdirection by the defenders of the status quo will be enough to convince the American people we should continue forward on our current unsustainable path.

I say to all my colleagues: Let's work together over the coming weeks to strengthen this legislation, empower small businesses, and put America's health care system on the road to recovery.

Thank you, Mr. President. As I yield the floor, I wish to acknowledge the great leadership of the chairman of the Small Business Committee, the Senator from Louisiana.

Thank you.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. KIRK). The Senator from Louisiana is recognized.

Ms. LANDRIEU. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Colorado and the Senator from Virginia for their remarks earlier this morning on the subject I am also going to speak on, which is the urgency for us to provide important help to millions of small businesses out there that are depending on us to get this reform done right.

I wish to speak for a minute about reforms for small business in America. There were many different reasons expressed by Members of Congress about why they began engaging in this very tough debate on health care. Many different issues brought us to the table. One of the issues that brought me to this table of reform and negotiation was the desperate plight of small businesses in America that have nowhere to turn.

As my colleagues have said in their very excellent statements this morning, the unpredictable and unsustainable and skyrocketing costs of health care to small business in America is damaging their ability to grow, is participating in an uptick of

bankruptcies, is diminishing their ability to hire people and create jobs at a time when our country needs those jobs created, perhaps more than ever in the last 25 or 30 years. Until we get health care right for small business, they cannot get job creation right for America. It is as simple as that.

So as difficult as this debate has been—and it has been very long, very arduous, with lots of different views—one thing we must do, in the final weeks and months of the debate, is get it right for small business. I have heard from hundreds of small business owners as chairman of the Small Business Committee. My members have heard from hundreds. We have heard from thousands, through their representative associations, from conservative associations, to moderate, to more liberal associations representing a broad stretch of small businesses in this country, saying this is their No. 1 issue.

Just this week, Barbara Biersmith, who owns Sylvan Learning Center in Monroe, LA, a small business owner—1 out of the 27 million that exist in the United States of America—and 27 million is a lot of people, a lot of businesses and employees. She is one. She is quoted in the Monroe News Star this week:

As a business owner, I have struggled in vain for more than 22 years to find a way to provide health insurance for my employees.

Health insurance providers tell me I have too few employees to make a group. Or they tell me that some of my employees have pre-existing conditions that excludes them from a group and that would make the group too small.

The kind of highly educated, experienced people I prefer to hire nearly always have preexisting conditions. Who doesn't have a preexisting condition by the age 30?

Considering that being a woman of childbearing age is considered a pre-existing condition, I think she is right. Who doesn't have one these days based on the interpretation of these policies? She goes on to say:

Because my business can't provide good health benefits effectively, I am restricted to hiring people who are covered by their spouse's medical insurance.

This is something that is not talked about often. I know my colleague from Washington is waiting to speak. I will go through this as quickly as I can. I hear this over and over again when I am on the streets and in towns and communities back home and I don't hear it here. Let me say it. I have any number of people who come up to me and say: Senator, thank you for working hard on health care. I am a little concerned or confused about what you all are doing but try to get it right because my health care is through my spouse who works for the government or my health care is through my spouse who works for a big company, and if I didn't have that health care, I wouldn't have any.

I was in a restaurant last week, and the gentlemen who owns it told me this: I couldn't be a small business

owner but for my health care that is covered through my spouse.

It is right to get the policy right so everybody can have access to affordable health care coverage.

She goes on to say:

I hope and pray our representatives and Senators soon pass Federal legislation to help the really small businesses of America.

Let me say I hope that help is on the way. If we can negotiate this bill, in terms of robust exchanges, subsidies for small businesses, particularly these very small businesses of under 10 employees or 25 employees, it would help. The situation Barbara is facing is not acceptable and must be corrected. But her situation is not unique, as I said. According to a report by the Small Business Majority, the health care costs for small businesses are expected to increase from \$156 billion in 2009 to \$2.4 trillion by 2018.

Before I put up the next chart, I need to repeat these numbers because they are dramatic. These are numbers published by the Small Business Majority's report, based on actual data. This is a bill that small business cannot pay. This is a bill they cannot pay. We must get the costs moving in a different direction. It will take some time, but we must get this chart going from up to down. That is why I have pushed every day of this debate to focus on cost containment. Not only is it important for taxpayers and government, it is absolutely critical for small businesses to have more choices at lower costs.

This chart shows the graph in a different way. This shows the cumulative cost of health care benefits—the first one. This is indicating job loss, and 178,000 small business jobs will be lost in 2018 due to the high cost of health care. That is up from 39,000. Companies can't continue to hire if they have to pay higher premiums for the employees they still have working for them.

Costs are high because of a broken insurance market where insurers, in order to satisfy their stockholders, put a greater focus on their bottom line. I understand that when you are in business, you need to make a profit. I understand that is why you are in business. I have no problem with people making profits—and significant ones—as long as the rules are fair and as long as there is opportunity to keep our values in order. One of the values we have in America is people going into business making a profit but making sure, if you are in the business of insurance and delivering benefits, that is what you are delivering to the people you are trying to serve. So we need some adjustments in those rules and regulations. That is what I think we are doing in our reform bill.

More alarmingly, getting back to the statistics, according to some reports, including a recent New York Times article, the insurance companies are planning to raise rates even higher today in anticipation of our reform effort. This is very unsettling, and the

sooner we act the better I think we will be—to help reform this market, to bring some order to the framework. That would be extremely helpful.

Lack of choice and competition is a problem, as I said. In Louisiana, our two top insurers maintain 74 percent of the market. In Alaska, I understand, there are two insurers maintaining 95 percent of the market. This is not real choice. It is not real competition. That is why the exchanges we have in most of the base bills, making them more robust, making subsidies as generous as we can to encourage individuals to assume responsibility for their health care, as well as subsidizing small businesses to encourage them to get into these large pools, I believe—and many of us believe—that will help to drive down costs, as we reform the private market.

To level the playing field for small businesses and to provide working families with more choices at lower costs, the bill we will vote on in the Senate will have as robust an exchange system as possible. These exchanges will allow businesses and individuals to pool to give them the negotiating power and to spread risk.

We estimate today that small businesses pay retail, as the Senator from Virginia, Mr. WARNER said. Everybody else pays wholesale. Small business pays retail. The price of paying retail is a minimum of 18 percent more on premiums that they are paying. So we want to get that savings. The exchanges will achieve that. The exchanges will also achieve lower administrative costs, so you don't have to hire a full-time lawyer or accountant to navigate the wide variety—actually, there are limited choices today, but you will have more transparency, more robust exchanges.

Finally, regardless of the level of benefit choices, there should be a limit on how much individuals must spend out of pocket and a minimum standard of care among all the plan levels. These are some of the protections we are working on for small businesses, which will benefit individuals as well.

Again, I thank my colleagues for being on the floor this morning. I think Senator CANTWELL, the Senator from Washington, who is here to give voice to this important part of the debate. Again, we have hundreds of Members of Congress. We all came to this debate carrying various issues and with greater concerns than others. One of my great concerns has been, as we try to find a way to dig ourselves out of this great recession—some say the worst economic situation since the Great Depression—the only way we are going to do that is for businesses to create jobs. Right now, there is a big burden that they have been carrying alone. They need help, support, and they need more tax credits, more robust subsidies, and a more orderly private market framework that allows the insurance companies to be in business and to make a profit but also allows small businesses

to be able to afford quality coverage for American workers, so we can get back to being the most productive workforce in the world.

I yield the floor for the Senator from Washington.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington is recognized.

Ms. CANTWELL. Mr. President, I come to the floor to join my colleagues to talk about the rising cost of health care on small businesses. I thank the chair of the Small Business Committee, Senator LANDRIEU, from Louisiana. She has been an outspoken and articulate advocate for small business. She is constantly focusing on what we are going to do to help small businesses in America, and she wants to make sure any health care legislation that is passed out of the Senate focuses on that. That is very important because we know that when we talk about small businesses in this current environment, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to our health care system. That is to say they have long been the backbone of the American economy. Small businesses employ about 40 percent of our workforce. Even in a downturn, the job creation we are going to see is going to come from small businesses. If we can address their concerns in health care reform about the rising cost of health care, then we are going to be doing ourselves a favor because they are going to be able to grow more jobs and grow the economy.

I applaud the Senator from Louisiana for her efforts and join with my colleagues, Senators WARNER, UDALL, and SHAHEEN, in coming down here to describe why we think it is so important that we get health care reform and that we do something about this because we really do want to get our economy going, and we certainly want to control costs so that small businesses can grow jobs.

Why is this so important? We have seen a 120-percent increase in premiums over the last 10 years. That is to say, from 1999 to 2009, insurance premiums have increased 120 percent—120 percent. What family in America can sustain the constant increase in insurance premiums every year? The fact is, they cannot.

In my State, we have seen a sharp rise in those who are without health insurance because the premiums keep going up. More and more small businesses have to make choices between keeping employees on the rolls or cutting back on their health insurance. And they are making those choices. It puts all of us at a disadvantage.

What should we be doing instead about the rising costs of premiums in health care? We should be doing something to bend the cost curve. You will hear many of my colleagues, as you did this morning, talk about bending the cost curve and why it is so important. Right now, if we look at what is happening with health insurance, as I said, it already increased 120 percent over 10

years. The next 10-year period, it is supposed to increase in the same way, double in cost, increase about 7.9 to 8 percent a year. So that means if we do nothing, small businesses are going to continue to see this escalator of costs keep going up for, and that means they are going to employ fewer and fewer people because they cannot afford the health care coverage.

We see that general inflation is about 2 percent, but this increase in premiums is about, as I said, 7 to 8 percent. Why are we seeing this huge increase in the cost of premiums if general inflation is only about 2 percent? This, in my opinion, is what the health care debate should be about. This difference between general inflation and health care cost increases should be the entire debate. What are we going to do to drive down the costs so that health care costs are kept more in pace with inflation?

Why are these statistics so important? The issue is that, according to the National Small Business Association, only 38 percent of small businesses provided health insurance last year. That is down 61 percent from 1993. So we are continuing to see that shrinkage in people offering coverage. Of those who do offer coverage, 72 percent say they are struggling to continue to offer coverage to their employees.

An MIT study shows that the cost of health care to small business will more than double in the next 10 years, just as it has in the last 10 years, and that small businesses pay up to 18 percent more than the same coverage for larger firms. What that means is small businesses are being disadvantaged. They are being disadvantaged because they do not have the same clout in the marketplace as a large employer to negotiate benefits and drive down costs.

What do we want to do about that? What we want to do is give small businesses the same kind of negotiating power large companies have to negotiate for benefits. In fact, health care reform and helping small businesses should be able to negotiate with insurance companies to drive down the costs of their plans.

This is something that is already part of the underlying bill we passed out of the Finance Committee. I am sure that when we see legislation coming to the Senate floor this Friday, we will see the same kind of provision, at least with the basic health plan, a provision I helped coauthor in the legislation that would allow States to negotiate on behalf of the uninsured, allowing those who are employed in small businesses to help lower the costs. In our State, this plan has driven costs down 30 to 40 percent lower than what those individuals would be able to get in an individual market. That is amazing, the fact that they have been able to pool together 40,000 to 60,000 people, go to the marketplace, and say to insurance providers: If you want access to our insurance business, you have to

give us a discount. I call it the Costco model. I don't know how many people here this morning understand the Costco model, but the Costco model is something where you buy in bulk and you make large purchases. You should get a discount. That is what we are saying. We want to give small businesses the same kind of purchasing power large businesses have so they can drive down costs. That is going to be a critical component of this legislation, and this Senator, along with my colleagues who are out on the floor today, is going to make sure that negotiating power exists in a final bill for small business.

Second, we need to make sure we also have provider reform, that provider payments reward not just volume but value. Right now in our health care delivery system, there is a lot of focus given to what I would say is the quantity of health care that is delivered, the fee-for-service system that basically ends up having insurers paying physicians for the number of patients they have seen or the number of tests they have ordered but is not generated or focused on payment to a physician based on the outcome of the patient. There are provider reforms in this legislation that will also help drive down the cost to small businesses because those providers will be focusing on what it takes to deliver health care to those individuals.

Third, we need to have better transparency on drug pricing because transparency of cost is something that will help us in negotiating, as a government purchaser, better health care benefits. Right now, there is a lot of unknown about health care costs in drug pricing because middlemen basically negotiate discounts on behalf of their customers but end up pocketing some of those benefits.

We want to make sure all three of these points are part of vital legislation to help drive down the cost for small businesses.

I have many small businesses come into my office. I met with some in the State of Washington. We are very proud of the diverse array of companies that exist in our State. A lot of people look at some of the major employers such as Boeing or Microsoft or, as I mentioned, Costco, Starbucks. Washington State is home to many entrepreneurs. There are many great companies that may be the big companies of the future but are the small businesses today, and they need our help and assistance.

Two of those, Kent and Linda Davis, run a technology consulting firm and pay \$1,500 per month for health insurance—\$1,500 per month. They just learned that in 2010 their premiums will increase by another \$300 per month. This is the third substantial increase they have had in a row. They want to hire more employees, but they cannot because of the cost of health care.

Another successful entrepreneur who has come into my office, Gene Otto, is

the owner of the San Francisco Street Bakery. You might think the San Francisco Street Bakery is in San Francisco, but it is actually in Olympia, WA, and it employs 20 people. Over the past decade, the increases in health insurance premiums have forced them to take dramatic reductions in the level of benefits and the number of employees they can cover. This is a company that wants to grow. They want to expand. They have great products and great services.

It is people such as the Davises and Gene Otto who are the economic engine of our economy. They are going to continue to depend on us to make sure that in this legislation and in this legislative debate, we are going to do everything we can to help small businesses grow.

Small businesses cannot grow if health care costs are going to rise 8 to 10 percent a year. It will hamper the ability of those small businesses to meet the demands and challenges of their workforce and keep them healthy, facing an economy that has been certainly challenged by this big downturn we have seen but that needs to go back to growth in the future. They want to be part of that. They want to be part of that growth, and they want to be part of helping our economy recover. But to do that, we are going to have to do something to control health care costs.

I applaud my colleagues who I know share these same issues and concerns: the Senator from Virginia, who has been very outspoken on the fact that we have to change our system to make sure we are bending the cost curve and focusing on driving down costs with provider reforms; my colleague from Louisiana, who is focused on making sure small businesses have clout and access to small business negotiations that large companies have; my colleague Senator SHAHEEN, who also has been a big supporter of making sure we have provider reform in the system; and Senator UDALL, who comes from a State that knows health care costs are a key component. If we want our economy to grow, we have to drive down health care costs.

Two of our former colleagues have been on the floor in the last few minutes—the Vice President of the United States and the Secretary of Interior. We are glad they have come up to Capitol Hill to continue discussions with us about how important this legislation is. I thank them for that. I thank them for their service to our country and for their willingness to serve in the administration. We certainly miss them in the Senate. But I think it emphasizes the urgency of the health care legislation, that our economy is struggling, that we want it to grow, that we think small businesses are going to be a key component of that, but we have to give them negotiating power. We have to give them the ability to negotiate with insurance plans to drive down the costs, and we have to do bet-

ter at reforming the system so we can see that growth happen in America.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, will you please let me know when 8 minutes has elapsed?

I, too, see the Secretary of Interior on the floor, who formerly was a Member of this body. We miss him. We are glad he is here. We are glad he is taking care of the treasured landscapes of America.

HEALTH CARE REFORM

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, an unusual thing is about to happen here: an actual debate is about to break out on the floor of the Senate about health care. Sometimes we are talking past each other. My friends on the other side talk about jobs and small business, so let me start there.

The difference between the Democratic proposals for health care and the Republicans is the Democrats start with a 2,000-page bill, more or less, with a government takeover, with more than \$1 trillion in spending, with new taxes, higher premiums, and Medicare cuts, and we don't believe they can spend that much more money without increasing the debt—in other words, all going in the wrong direction.

We believe we ought to be reducing costs step by step, and the Republican proposals say that step No. 1 should be small business health plans. They are saying they have an idea about small businesses, and we are saying the same thing.

In my few minutes today, I would like to show why our proposals are better than theirs. For example, Senator ENZI of Wyoming, who was chairman and is now the ranking Republican member of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, has a small business health plan he has been trying to get this Senate to vote on for years. In fact, this plan came up before the Senate, and our Democratic friends blocked it. They like to say Republicans are the party of no; they are the party of no because on May 11, 2006, they voted no to small business health plans which would lower health care costs for thousands of employees in this country.

Let me be specific about that and why it is superior to the suggestion that has been made in the Finance Committee bill, the 2,000-page bill which has come out of the Senate Finance Committee. In the Enzi plan, the Republican plan, we would allow small businesses to come together and pool their resources. What that means is, if I have a small business with 50 people and you have one with 100 people and you have someone with open heart surgery, you cannot afford to keep paying for health insurance anymore because that one employee's health care costs make it impossible for you to do that or you have to lay people off or you